

JUDIT NAGY

CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS ON THE CANVAS: EUROPEAN
INFLUENCES ON CANADIAN LANDSCAPE PAINTING
1867–1890

Introduction

Whereas the second half of the 19th century is known as *the age of transition* in Victorian England, the post-confederation decades of the same century can be termed the *age of possibilities* in Canadian landscape painting, both *transition* and *possibilities* referring to a stage of development which focuses on potentialities and entails cultural encounters. Fuelled both by Europe's cultural imprint and the refreshing impressions of the new land, contemporary Canadian landscapists of backgrounds often revealing European ties tried their hands at a multiplicity and mixture of styles. No underlying homogenous Canadian movement of art supported their endeavour though certain tendencies are observable in the colourful cavalcade of works conceived during this period.

After providing a general overview of the era in Canadian landscape painting, the current paper will discuss the oeuvre of two landscapists of the time, the English-trained Allan Edson, and the German immigrant painter Otto Reinhold Jacobi¹ to illustrate the scope of the ongoing experimentation with colour and light and to demonstrate the extent of European influence on contemporary Canadian landscape art.

¹ Members of the Canadian Society of Artists, both Edson and Jacobi were exceptional in the sense that, unlike many landscapists at Confederation, they traded in their European settings into genuine Canadian ones. In general, “artists exhibited more scenes of England and the Continent than of Ontario and Quebec.” (Harper 179)

An overview of the era in landscape painting

Meaning to capture the spirit of the given period in Canadian history, W. H. New, suggests that “the age was [...] of definition” (81). In addition, he uses the terms *Victorian*, *progressive*, *nationalist*, *imperial*, which prove equally helpful in determining British influence on contemporary Canadian landscape painting. Indeed, landscape painting between Confederation and the turn of the century was largely *Victorian* in its precision, truthfulness and attention to minor detail (Harper 180).² Victorian aesthetics considered art the best approximation to life, which brought about the quest for realistic depiction.³ In the same spirit, George Eliot praised the realistic vision achieved by contemporary landscapists whereas he gave voice to his resentment assessing contemporary portrait painters’ work, who “treated their subjects under the influence of traditions and prepossessions rather than direct observation” (Eliot xx).⁴

Technological *progress* affected arts: the camera served as a new tool to present objective reality. Experimentations with photographic vision are discernible in contemporary landscape painting. The completion of the CPR facilitated artists’ discovery of the diversity and variety of landscape⁵ thus contributing to the popularity of the genre. Immigration was another important factor both hindering and boosting progress. The influx of British immigrants in the 1850s and 60s contained a quota of artists. In fact, “few [...] artists were not immigrants”⁶ and “few lacked academic training—the newly arrived artists had undergone a long and

² In fact, the invention of the camera facilitated this development in Canada: “[These painters’s] vision owes much to the camera” (Harper 180).

³ See John Ruskin.

⁴ The essay “The Natural History of German Life” was written in 1856. Seminar handouts, Éva Péteri, 2002/1 5.25 American transcendentalist thinkers such as Emerson shared Eliot’s views regarding the importance of direct observation. According to the Princeton school, the main ideas of the transcendentalist movement rooted in German philosophy, they originate in/ from Kant (Sarbu xx).

⁵ “Lucius Obrien, following the post-confederation interest in the regions of the country, and enabled travel courtesy of a railway pass, painted massive landscapes of the Rockies, sometimes to advertise the railway, exaggerating the grandeur of the mountain scenery” (New 117).

⁶ See also: “Several of the most prominent exhibitors were either British-born or sons of British immigrants living in Ontario and Quebec” (Harper 180).

vigorous art training and were expert technicians” (Harper 188). Some of these artists remained fully under the influence of their former accents. Moreover, they made Canadian art life too conscious of foreign developments⁷, which put a crimp in the evolution of a uniquely Canadian style:

British artists, accustomed to the gentler English countryside, were stimulated by the sheer size and frequently violent nature of Canadian waterfalls and rivers. Most of them, however, were so heavily influenced by European traditions that they tended to draw the land as they thought it should be instead of how it really was. These ties to the past prevented most of the paintings of this period from being [...] a product of a uniquely Canadian experience and perception (net xx)

On the other hand, other immigrant painters recognised the incompatibility of European light and colour with Canadian reality, hence the necessity to break with tradition.⁸ This induced considerable experimentation encouraging artists to seek new modes of expression even if, in practice, this, to a great extent, meant attempts at adjusting European techniques to Canadian subject matter.

Technological progress, territorial expansion and the resulting social changes brought about an upsurge of national pride. Landscape painting proved a suitable medium to materialize the new-born Canadian *nationalism*. The varied geography of the country provided rich subject matter for landscapists to exploit. Ruskin’s view that “the painter cannot paint anything better than a divine thing” (xx) contributed to making nature a popular subject.⁹ In Canada, the interest in landscape painting can partly be attributed to the fact that the colourful and often spectacular landscape, representing the divinity of nature, was associated with the greatness of the nation: a Canadian manifest destiny. The nationalism of the period led to the emergence of the quest that still seems to haunt Canadian artists today: the quest for national identity. In this sense, the period was an *age of definition* in Canadian landscape painting, indeed.

⁷ “[Canadian landscape painters] had a broad awareness of what was happening in the US, England, and Germany” (Harper 197).

⁸ The case of the British water colour school can be mentioned as an example (Harper 188—192).

⁹ Seminar handouts, Éva Péteri, 2002/1 5.26 Similar thoughts emerged in American transcendentalism and German idealism as represented by Goethe. (“Nature is but the living garment of God”) (Sarbu xx).

Finally, the period could be considered *imperial* as Canada had close ties with Britain art-wise and the Canadian institutions of art of the period were modeled after their British counterparts¹⁰. While Prince Albert tried to enliven art life in Britain by promoting cultural matters, the Marquis de Lorne¹¹ exported the same spirit to Canada. Most contemporary Canadian art teachers gained their knowledge in British art centres, many were also British immigrants, just as some well-known artists such as Allan Edson, took study trips to Britain, and, consciously or subconsciously, imported British traditions of contemporary landscape art onto the New Continent. In elite art circles, the British landscape painting techniques were largely accepted as etalon, they often set the artistic standards.

Cultural influence on the Canadian painting of the period

As the latter statement also suggests, one of the remarks often sounded in critical essays is that Canadian landscapes of the period bore a certain resemblance in techniques to their European counterparts, which is mostly due to the contemporary critical expectations that were, to a great extent, formed by the Royal Academy of Arts: a British institution.

When the Marquis de Lorne and his wife founded the Royal Canadian Academy in 1880 they hoped to encourage native art, but the institutionalizing of taste reconfirmed for another generation certain idealizing convocations of landscape depiction ... The subjects of arts were local, but the techniques and colour sense European. (New 116)

Another element of frequent criticism is that Canadian landscapists did not challenge the European-set artistic standards but tried to fit their work into the European mould instead.

[Canadian artists] could accept the implicit (and often explicit) hierarchies of culture that derived from Europe—accept the idea that European standards were universal, and [...] paint in way that would primary seek European approval. (New 23)

¹⁰ The Canadian Academy of Arts was founded by the Marquis de Lorne, which a year later was supplied with the prefix Royal, following Queen Victoria's request (Harper 185).

¹¹ “Lorne wanted [...] an academy of meritorious painters, sculptors and architects [...] his imagination went no further than a feeling that he should recreate little replicas of British cultural organisations in the new Dominion” (Harper 183).

The case is more complex, though. Firstly, only the first group of artists I referred to in the point *progress* conformed consciously to the European mainstream of art. Secondly, Victorian England itself saw the decline of Romanticism and witnessed a transitory phase awaiting the birth of Modernism. Thirdly, beside the European influence the other great center that shaped the Canadian landscape experience of the time was New England. This fact signified the onset of an era when “[Canadian painters] would mimic other models, borrow from American culture, and seek American approval as an alternative to things European” (New 23). Yet, American landscape painting of the period owes much to German techniques, so one may say that it is equally European in its essence. Consider the works of the Hudson River School or the Rocky Mountain School.¹²

What did all the mimesis and conformism come down to in the long run?

The most immediate result of this [the critical context of Canadians imitating foreign models] was the enshrinement of a set of conventions about nature [...] but nature was a subject [...] that concurrently proved Canada’s distinctiveness. (New 112)

Despite the fact that artists were trained to see things in conventional ways, Nature in Canada lived its own life and was unwilling to fit into the mould European academic hands had prepared for it. It forced the European eye to adjust to the view rather than the view adjusting to the eye: “It is inevitable that a country with such marked physical characteristics as Canada should impress itself forcefully upon our artists” (New 265). Charles W. Jeffreys’s words also reveal the important motive as to why landscapists may have chosen to abandon traditional subjects (xx).

This adjustment did not happen overnight, it took years of experimentation until the anomaly from contemporary European landscape paintings became visible.

Nature supplied Canadian landscapists with a genuinely Canadian material. Distinct and inspiring as the input was, it lacked the power to breed a uniquely Canadian style during the period in question. In Harriet Ford’s words:

¹² Representative painters are Thomas Cole, Thomas Doughty, Asher B. Durand; Alfred Bierstadt (*Oxford Dictionary of Arts* xx).

Though the painting on Canadian subject is a worthy ambition it does not necessarily make a Canadian school. This is a deeper, more profound thing of the spirit, and such an objective would come only with an artistic ripening which requires time. (Harper 200)

Yet, Canadian subjects did help the development of Canadian features, which in time were conducive to the birth of a Canadian school. As Canadian light conditions, and with it, colours¹³ differed from those of Europe, European methods were inappropriate to paint Canadian subjects in the prevailing realistic, truthful mode. Real Canadian features in landscape painting thus started with the realistic reflection of Canadian light conditions.

Analysis

Susanna Moodie wrote in the “Quebec” chapter of *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852):

The day was warm, and the cloudless heavens of that peculiar azure tint which gives to the Canadian skies and waters a brilliancy unknown in more northern latitudes. The air was pure and elastic, the sun shone out with uncommon splendour, lighting up the changing woods with a rich mellow colouring, composed of a thousand brilliant and vivid dyes. The mighty river rolled flashing and sparkling onward, impelled by a strong breeze, that tipped its short rolling surges with a crest of snowy foam.

Had there been no object of interest in the landscape than this majestic river, its vast magnitude, and the depth and clearness of its waters, and its great importance to the colony, would have been sufficient to have riveted the attention, and claimed the admiration of the thinking mind. (Moodie 39)

As the above ekphrastic excerpt proves, Moodie also found the *peculiar azure tint* conspicuous of Canadian skies and very foreign to English light conditions. Her Ontario abode abounded in clear, sunny days, with far more light than her native England. But it was not all about latitudes as Canadian skies equally differ from light conditions offered by Mediterranean locations.

Another important observation is connected to how the water responds to the altered light conditions: the resulting reflection, which triggers the

¹³ Light conditions determine colour.

words *brilliancy* and *sparkling* will become an objective of truthful landscape portrayal.¹⁴

The unusual skies and their effects on water challenged old European techniques and brought about experimentation in landscape painting which I will now illustrate with the example of Alan Edson and Otto Reinhold Jacobi. I will examine their use of colour and light in a number of paintings representative of their artistic development and showing the extent of experimentation they carried out.

Allan Edson (1846–1888)

Allan Edson took his first painting lessons from Robert Duncanson, an American artist, whose influence shows primarily in his assertion of foreground elements (University of Lethbridge Art Gallery). In the 1860s he became an active member of the Montreal art community, where he met Lucius O'Brien, Otto Jacobi and John Fraser (xx xx). From 1861 on he took several art study trips to England, where he was affected by the Pre-Raphaelites, whose influence is discernible in his attention to detail and his concern for atmosphere and clarity (Collections). Taking delight in painting quiet, secluded moments of nature, he was “a painter of significant individuality and imagination, whose mature work is often likened to an early form of impressionism” (University of Lethbridge Art Gallery).

Edson’s early phase testifies to Biedermeier accents¹⁵, which can be illustrated well with his painting entitled *Lumbermen at the River Saint-Maurice* (1868). The sky is bathing in soft, European blue, the vegetation is dressed in mild, warm colours, there is a sublime mountain peak in the background but it is tamed by the sunlight, which gently slides down its slope towards the river. The water of the river is dressed in matt rather than in brilliant colours; the dynamism of the muddy blue water is

¹⁴ Interestingly, water and light became vital subjects of the Impressionist movement in Europe, too (xx xx).

¹⁵ Biedermeier was popular in Austria and Germany between the end of the Napoleonic wars and the year of revolutions (1815–48). The most popular Austrian representative, Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller said that “the close study of nature should be the basis of painting”. Biedermeier landscapists were known for “their loving attention to detail” Also, they “recognized the importance of the role of light. Their work later developed into dynamic, light-impregnated realism” (Chilvers 561).

juxtaposed to the motionlessness of the river bank. The insertion of the boat into the foreground is reminiscent of Duncanson.

Before the Storm—Lake Memphremagog (1868) displays colours even more faded than those of Edson's Biedermeier period; we have entered his *dull and gloom* phase (Harper xx). Capturing the sublime side of nature, the painting depicts the romantic subject of an impending storm. The majestic, edgy mountain peak buried in mist and cloud fills the spectator with awe. The vertical strokes of rain coming down and the horizontal strokes of land and lake are juxtaposed. Darker and lighter hues form a complex system of tonal contrast. The water appears to reflect the threatening colour of the sky, and the flat waves display no brilliance. The whole picture is coated with a thin cover of soft brown haze.

Mount Orford—Paysage des Cantons de l'Est (1870) represents a slight change from gloom, not very pronounced, though, and certainly not very skilfully executed: brown haze lifts, colours become more pastel-like, lighter but colder. Light effects seem unnatural as if a huge lamp was lit above the hills in the foreground. The more distant part of the same hill is depicted more successfully, apart from the sudden surge of waves at its foot. Judging from the light conditions, this painting was painted in sunshine and the occasional patches of clouds were later turned into tufts of violet smoke signalling an approaching tempest as if the painter had found his initial painting too bright. The flat, horizontal strokes of the water testify of elongated, lazy crests typical of calm breeze rather than storm. There is a slight sparkle but it seems to come from the large, brown rock in the left, lower corner.

The new, bright colours of *Landscape with Cascade* (1872) herald the gaiety and optimism of Edson's new artistic stage. Yet, the sky remains pale blue and pastel-like, even with the light mauve base of paint on which the blue was spread. Colours are warmer and brighter, the rocks, the vegetation and the stream are bathing in a yellowish-green light. The dynamism of the foamy water is opposed to the static posture of rocks and trees, which, both in the left upper corner and on the right hand side are stiff and vertical. The water is matt rather than brilliant even though the afternoon sun encases it.

Luminist in essence¹⁶, the painting entitled *Storm at Lake Memphremagog* (1880) treats light effects with photographic precision. The indispensable *natura terribilita* component is represented by the rolling cumuli in the background, projecting the momentum of the approaching storm onto the canvas. The dark, cool hues towering in the left upper corner form a contrast with the bright, warm colours of the fall foliage positioned centrally. The reflection of this contrast in the water and the clearcut outlines contribute to the play of light that pervades the painting.

Otto Reinhold Jacobi (1812–1901)

The Prussian-born artist Otto Reinhold Jacobi settled in Montreal around 1860 with fellow artist Adolphe Vogt. In Harper's comparison, he worked with "subtler atmospheric effects" than Edson (xx). The reflection of light both on water and on land were important elements of his landscapes, which bear testimony to the influence of both German Romanticism and American Luminism (Canartist).¹⁷

Autumn Landscape (1868) has even more romantic gloom than Edson's paintings composed in his early period. The majestic peak in the background underlines the sublime side of nature Jacobi wanted to emphasize here. The whole picture is dressed in brown atmospheric haze, which radiates warmth and dejection at the same time. The movement of the water in the foreground creates the feeling of dynamism and forms a contrast with the darker static banks of the stream. Both the water in the foreground and the mountain in the background symbolize the majestic power of nature.

There is slightly more colour used for *Forest Stream* (1869). We can observe how meticulously each object is put on the canvas. However, the light effects are unnatural as light is shed upon the wild, foamy mountain

¹⁶ For example, light is centered on the withering tree leaves, dramatising the cumuli and nimbus lurking in the background from the left and also shading the foreground to almost tarry black at places (Chilvers xx).

¹⁷ "Although he painted in Romantic style, he was known to have used photography to achieve a greater degree of naturalness in his landscapes. [He was] seeking to harness something of the new world, a practice that would become habit to a generation of Canadian artists. But despite his adventures in the wild, Jacobi was not entirely successful in capturing the spirit of this country in his finished works, where atmosphere, tone and tenor remain anchored in European aesthetics" (Canartist).

stream in the focus of the picture while everything else is coated with gloom, forming the conventional Romantic contrast and proclaiming the domination of the sublime. The redness of the sky along the horizon adds a touch of drama and mystery to the atmosphere. Also, some of the trees on the river bank are painted in a hue of silverish-green that does not exist under any condition of light. One can detect attempts at capturing the brilliancy of water in the foreground of the picture by the artist's altering different tones of grey employing flat, horizontal strokes. However, the rest of the water looks matt. All in all, the picture seems to have been composed in an *imaginary* rather than a *real* key, the only *real* being the inspiring force of the power of water.

Jacobi's experimentation with the reflection of light on the water becomes more pronounced in *Canadian Autumn* (1870) where his employment of Luminist techniques¹⁸ lends a touch of sparkle and brilliance to the stream in the foreground. The sunlit fall colours of the majestic mountain in the background form a contrast with the darker, shadowy foreground. Light effects become realistic and attention is paid to detail. According to Russell Harper, the year 1870 marked a division line in Jacobi's career: "In 1870 Jacobi abandoned his Germanic accents to experiment with realistic truthfulness in painting rivers, rocks and trees" (xx).

La Riviere Montmorency (ca. 1870) is a further step towards bringing the depiction of light reflection on water to perfection. The potential power of the water is illustrated on the rocks shaped by the stream, now calm and quiet. The vivid blue Canadian sky is not exposed, the resulting diffused light induces the scattered, subdued, silvery glitter of the greenish brown water.¹⁹

From the middle of the 1880s on, Jacobi gradually moved away from the concrete, towards a degree of pictorial abstraction. The painting entitled *Landscape* (1883) indicates how his clear and photographic outlines commenced to blur and wane. *Landscape*, of pastel impressions, has again too much of the European soft blue sky to be realistic. The vivid colours of the red maple bring life into the otherwise static scene. The river is smooth, unruffled, probably to show Jacobi's continued interest in

¹⁸ I.e. an appreciation of the way light could achieve sparkle and luminosity (Chilvers xx).

¹⁹ The painting shows the influence of Luminism, esp. Bingham.

light reflection on water. The gathering cumuli in the background suggest a forming storm, a Romantic remnant.

Conclusion

Very often, books speak of anything in landscape painting before the Group of Seven as something inferior, not distinctively Canadian. Even in more modest estimations, “Only with the early impressionism of Maurice Cullen and J. W. Morrice near the turn of the century did traditions of colour … begin to change” (New 117).²⁰ Yet, no one can deny the importance of the post-confederation period. As we have seen, tremendous experimentation was going on then, which seems slightly more pronounced by artists who had some European schooling or teachers or were European immigrants themselves.²¹

Basically, these men set down highly romantic views but their objective and detailed photographic vision makes their work something more than simply romantic art. No broadly based national style emerged in those years but in some landscapes one does find Canadian qualities which are such that no one would readily feel that they were by painters of any other country. (Harper 181)

European influence worked as a catalyst to start Canadian landscape painting on its own way. The experimentation with colour triggered by the light effects foreign to the European-trained artist’s eye was an important step in the long process along which Canada developed its own artistic style(s) in the genre. Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to say that it was a … motivated by a cultural encounter.

²⁰ The landscapes of the period between the confederation and 1890 all bear some traces of Romanticism, whether it be theme, colour or composition. (romantic themes: gloomy autumn landscape, dramatic sunsets and sunrises, coming storm, power and freshness of water, dark forests, etc.) Photographic vision, a parallel trend of importance, has its roots in Ruskin’s true-to-nature principle and in the artistic influence of the camera.

Painters aiming at depicting the landscape in a realistic way had to adjust European techniques of painting light to the light effects experienced on the new continent (xx).

²¹ Compare Lucius O’Brien and Alan Edson or Otto Rheinhold Jacobi. O’Brien’s colours are a lot softer.

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